Towering Trees and “Talented” Slaves

_The parables of Jesus have been spiritualized and their subversive content tamed. Can we bring them back to earth?_

_By Eric DeBode and Ched Myers_

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THE PARABLES OF JESUS in the synoptic Gospels represent the very oldest traditions in the New Testament. Despite this (or perhaps because of it), our churches often handle these stories timidly, if they handle them at all. Perhaps we intuit that there is something so wild and subversive about these tales that they are better kept safely at the margins of our consciousness.

Many Christians simply ignore the parables, believing that Jesus' teachings were eclipsed by later theological developments: either by his work on the cross (fundamentalists), or by Pauline doctrine (mainstream Protestants), or by the Church and its magisterium (Catholics), or by the Enlightenment (liberals). The parables are apprehended at most as quaint and poetic, but hardly relevant or substantive for Christian discipleship.

Most churches that do focus attention on Gospel parables spiritualize them relentlessly. Typically, the parables are preached as "earthly stories with heavenly meanings." Thus stories about landless peasants and rich landowners, or lords and slaves, or lepers and lawyers are lifted out of their social and historical context and reshaped into theological or moralistic fables bereft of any political or economic edge or consequence.

When the sociocultural context indigenous to the story is ignored or suppressed, however, we inevitably recontextualize the story in terms of our own unconscious political assumptions. Our imposed schema often defy the coherence of the text itself.

More importantly, though, this interpretive strategy functions to domesticate the parable to conform with our status quo. Thus stories meant to challenge our preconceptions are used to legitimate them. In this way, we disarm some of the Gospels' most powerful rhetorical weapons--weapons whose very intent is to rescue believers from domestication by that same status quo.

PARABLES ARE, BY DESIGN, irresistibly allegorical. Indeed, as Brandon Scott points out in Hear, Then, the Parable, the root of the Hebrew word for parable, mashal, means "to be like."
Webster's most generic definition of allegory reads: "the figurative treatment of one subject under the guise of another." The question becomes, then, what are the subjects being treated? This is where the church has too often jumped from trying to understand Jesus' allegory to ourselves allegorizing the allegory.

Jesus' purpose was to get us to see the world differently ("Do you have eyes, yet fail to see?" Mark 8:18; see 4:10-12). His pedagogic purpose was twofold: to unmask the illusions his audience had about the status quo and their place in it, and then to help that audience open its heart and mind to what he proposed as an alternative--what he called the "kingdom of God" (which is itself a metaphor). Today we might call this "deconstructing" and "reconstructing" consciousness.

Jesus thus employs two basic kinds of parables: those that attempted to reveal and critique the way the world really was ("There was a certain rich man and a certain beggar" Luke 16:19), and those that offered a vision of the way the world could be ("The kingdom of heaven may be likened unto" Matt. 18:2).

The genius of these stories was that they narrated recognizable scenarios in plain language that any illiterate peasant could understand: farming (Mark 4:3-20) and shepherding (Matt. 18:12-14), being in debt (Luke 7:41-43) and doing hard labor (Matt. 20:1-16), being excluded from banquets (Luke 14:7-23) and from the houses of the rich (Luke 16:19-31). These vignettes would draw the listener into their familiarity, only to throw in a surprise twist that would challenge popular assumptions about what was proprietary and what was possible: a miraculous harvest (Mark 4:8), an enemy as a friend (Luke 10:33), or unexpected vindication (Luke 18:2-4).

Contrary to our traditional spiritualizing treatment of them, then, parables are actually "earthy stories with heavy meanings," as William Herzog puts it in his important book Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed. To illustrate this, let us look at one representative example of each kind of parable.

JESUS ATTEMPTED TO ILLUSTRATE the kingdom with everyday images and examples, precisely to emphasize that God's reign is not an other-worldly proposition. Yet our North American churches have managed to sever Jesus' metaphors from the real social world from which they were drawn, erasing all economic or political characteristics of God's sovereignty. The "nature" parables are particularly vulnerable to this distortion (and thus, particularly popular with us). After all, a weed (Matt. 13:24-30) or a fig tree (Luke 13:6) is far easier to spiritualize than a rich man trying to consolidate his assets (Luke 12:16-20) or a king going to war (Luke 14:31).

So let us take the mustard seed parable (Mark 4:30-32), so well known as to be virtually proverbial, as our example. In Mark, the story of the mustard seed that grows into "the
greatest of all shrubs" is the last in a series of three seed parables that form the backbone of Jesus' first extended sermon in that Gospel (Mark 4:2-34).

That sermon opens with the famous sower story (4:3-8), which paints the familiar picture of a peasant dry-soil farmer, free casting seed and hoping for the best, at the mercy of pests and weeds, the elements, and the poor soil itself. Palestinian farmers and sharecroppers barely scratched out a living from the marginal plots onto which they had been pushed by the wealthy, who controlled the best arable land. Yet the "good" soil yields a miraculous harvest (4:8), an unimaginable bumper crop that symbolized enough surplus to shatter permanently the cycle of indebtedness for the farmer's entire extended family. Mark's audience doubtless wondered how such a miraculous harvest would ever be realized.

A second seed parable (4:26-29) suggests that it is not up to the farmer, because "the earth bears fruit of itself." Brandon Scott points out that the Greek here may be an allusion to one of the alternative economic principles of the Levitical sabbatical year: "What grows by itself in your harvest you shall not reap" (Lev. 25:5; see 2 Kings 19:29). This parable advocates not passivity but trust in the divine economy of grace and the practice of Sabbath economics! If we live within the limits of the land (instead of seeking to control or commodity it), and if we share the fruits of the land equitably by observing Sabbath and Jubilee traditions of wealth redistribution, there will be enough for everyone.

These parables thus portray the kingdom in terms of the real socioeconomic issues facing the first-century peasant farmer: critiquing the dominant economics of scarcity and debt with the Sabbath/Jubilee vision of abundance and grace. Perhaps anticipating opposition to this vision, the third seed story counsels a stubborn hope that is political as well as personal: despite the long odds, the smallest seed can indeed take root in a hostile world and flourish (4:30-32).

The mustard seed is surely allegorical--but is it a symbol for some mystical growth, or does it evoke themes of struggle against imperial power? The roots of this image in the Hebrew Bible give us some clues. The metaphor of shelter-offering branches "in which all the birds of the air can make nests" is found in tree parables throughout all Scripture, and is often a metaphor for political sovereignty.

The earliest example is found in Judges, where Jotham criticizes Abimelech's murderous grab for power in the Israelite confederacy (Judg. 9:1-21). In this political parody of centralized power, the olive, fig, and vine all refuse to abandon their productive tasks to become "king." The bramble (thorns!) however says: "If in good faith you are anointing me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon" (9:15).
Ezekiel's tree parables also protest against royal domination. In Ezekiel 17, the prophet attempts to persuade Israel's rulers to remain faithful to God even though they dwell in the shadow of the "tall cedars" of the surrounding empires, and to resist the temptation to forge security through military alliances (17:11-21). God promises to preserve Israel "that it may produce branches and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar ... in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind" (17:23).

A second parable satirizes imperial Egypt (Ezek. 31). Ezekiel asks Pharaoh: "Who are you like in your greatness?" (31:2, see Mark 4:30). He then reminds Pharaoh of Assyria, which also "towered high above all the trees of the field; its boughs grew large and its branches long ... All the birds of the air made their nests in its boughs" (31:5-9). But Assyria's empire crumbled: "On its fallen trunk settle all the birds of the air," the prophet taunts (31:13). Here we find an echo of the ancient story of the Tower of Babel: "All this in order that no trees by the waters may grow to lofty height or set their tops among the clouds" (31:14; see Gen. 11:4).

Daniel 4 interprets King Nebuchadnezzar's dream ("a tree at the center of the earth ... its top reached to heaven ... and the birds of the air nested in its branches, and from it all living beings were fed"). The prophet promises Nebuchadnezzar that the hubris of empire will be judged, and exhorts the king to "atone for your sins with justice and for your iniquities with mercy to the oppressed" (4:27).

This evidence makes it clear that scriptural tree parables should be understood not as quaint agrarian tales of fecundity, but rather as political theology.

Ezekiel's image of a client-state fed by streams flowing from another nation (31:4) aptly described the Judea of Mark's era in relation to the imperial center of Rome. And within Palestine, Mark's community was a small, persecuted minority. What chance did followers of Jesus' call to Jubilee have against the global power of the imperial economy? Yet the parable of the mustard seed proposes exactly such a mismatch, remembering the promise of Ezekiel: "All the trees of the field shall know that I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree" (Ezek. 17:24).

Sadly, our churches no longer embrace a radical vision of history that chooses the power of Jesus over and against the power of empire. Is it any wonder that we exercise so little economic or political imagination in our own imperial context?

EVEN MORE PROBLEMATIC THAN our sentimentalizing of kingdom parables is the way we misread Jesus' parables about the world, reading them as if they were kingdom parables--with disastrous consequences. The most notorious case is the infamous parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30).
This has been for many an unsettling story. It seems to promote ruthless business practices (v. 20), usury (v. 27), and the cynical view that the rich will only get richer while the poor become destitute (v. 29). Moreover, if we assume, as does the traditional reading, that the master is a figure for God, it is a severe portrait indeed: an absentee lord (v. 15) who cares only about profit maximization (v. 21), this character is hardhearted (v. 24) and ruthless (v. 30).

Despite these concerns, this story still routinely occasions countless homilies (usually on stewardship Sunday) about how we Christians should gainfully employ our "talents" for God--despite the fact that "talent" in the Gospel text has nothing to do with our individual gifts and everything to do with economics. Might it be that we have imposed upon the parable our capitalist presumptions about the glories of a system that rewards "venture capital," and thus read the story exactly backwards?

Our first clue lies in the parable that immediately precedes the story of the talents. A specifically kingdom teaching, the story of the bridesmaids reiterates the traditional gospel exhortation to "stay awake" so as not to be caught unawares by the "moment of truth" (Matt. 25:1-13). This story prefigures the drama in the Garden of Gethsemane, in which the disciples are urged to remain vigilant for when the time comes to confront injustice.

What follows is a story about a very rich master--but there is no indication that this is a kingdom parable (25:14). We have been warned to be alert!

The original audience of this story would not have had to allegorize the parable to make sense of it. Its portrait of a great household--the closest thing in antiquity to the modern corporation--was all too recognizable. The powerful patriarch would often be away on economic or political business. His affairs would be handled by slaves, who in Roman society often rose to prominent positions in the household hierarchy as "stewards" (25:15).

But the sums entrusted here border on hyperbole. Scott writes: "A talent was one of the largest values of money in the Hellenistic world. A silver coinage, it weighed between fifty-seven and seventy-four pounds. One talent was equal to 6,000 denarii." Since one denarius was an average subsistence wage for a day's labor, one talent was worth more than fifteen years wages. In the modern era, we might roughly translate the assets made available for investment at about 2.5 million dollars. These are elite financial dealings indeed!
The first two slaves double their master's investment (25:16-17). Though lauded by modern interpreters, this feat would have elicited disgust from the first-century audience. In his article "A Peasant Reading of the Parable of the Talents," Richard Rohrbaugh notes that in antiquity the highest legal interest rate was about 12 percent; anything higher was considered rapacious. This is the first of many hints that the operations of this household are something less than exemplary.

Bruce Malina in The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology has shown that in traditional Mediterranean society, the ideal was stability, not self-advancement. Anyone trying to accumulate inordinate wealth imperiled the equilibrium of society and was thus understood to be dishonorable. Greed was widely believed to characterize the rich, who extorted and defrauded other members of the community through lucrative trading, tax collecting, and lending money at interest. In fact, usury was understood in antiquity to be responsible for the destructive cycle of indebtedness and poverty, while profiting from commodity trading was explicitly condemned by no less a sage than Aristotle.

THE BIBLICALLY LITERATE, moreover, would recall the warning against stored surplus in Exodus 16:16-20, the prohibition against usury and profiteering off the poor in Leviticus 25:36ff, or Isaiah's condemnation of those who "join house to house and field to field" in their real-estate dealings (Isa. 5:8). Yet Herzog thinks it is precisely such unscrupulous business dealings that are implied by each slave's doubling his master's investment. Large landowners made loans to peasant small holders based on speculations of future crop production. With high interest rates and vulnerability to lean years and famine, farmers often were unable to make their payments, and faced foreclosure. After gaining control of the land, the new owner could continue to make a killing by hiring laborers to farm cash crops.

It is a process of economic exploitation and wealth accumulation that is still all too characteristic of our own global economy. In the parable, the master's slaves do this highly profitable dirty work well.

We, of course, undaunted by this historical context and blissfully interpreting the parable through capitalist lenses, have nothing but praise for these "good stewards." As Rohrbaugh puts it, "commentators of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have genuinely reveled in the parable's seeming exhortation to venturous investment and diligent labor." We then turn to castigate the third slave who, cautious and "unproductive," represents an object lesson of entrepreneurial failure (25:18). But if the manner of profiteering portrayed in the story
would have been understood by the original audience as rapacious, is it not possible that this noncooperating third slave might in fact be the hero of this parable?

When the master returns to settle accounts we find identical phrasing in his commendations of the first two financiers (25:21,23): "Well done, good and trustworthy slave--enter into the joy of your master."

We are used to reading this allegorically as connoting entry into heavenly bliss. But at the plain level of the parable it serves not only as a promotion ("I will put you in charge of many things"); it is also a reminder that these handlers are still slaves, and that it is the master's joy in which they are participating! We might say that these slaves are more captive than ever to the world controlled by their lord.

Like a good three-part joke, we now come to the punch line: The third slave is about to explain his (in)action (25:24-25). That he buried the money in the ground seems strange at first glance. But considering that many in Jesus' audience were farmers, there may be some wry peasant humor here. Those who work the land know that all true wealth comes from God, the source of rain, sunshine, seed, and soil. But this silver talent, when "sown," produced no fruit!

Here is the clash between two economic worldviews: the traditional agrarian notion of "use-value" and the elite's currency-based system of "exchange-value." Money cannot grow the natural way like seed, only unnaturally, through usury and swindling. Is this symbolic act of "planting" the talent a case of prophetic tricksterism to reveal that money is not fertile?

The third slave now begins to speak truth to power. "I knew you were a harsh man" (the Greek is skleros, a word associated with old Pharaoh's disease of hardheartedness). "You reap where you did not sow, and gather where you did not scatter seed" (25:24).

With these words the third slave becomes what Herzog calls a "whistle-blower," having unmasked the fact that the master's wealth is derived entirely from the toil of others. He profits from the backbreaking labor of those who work the land. Unwilling to participate in this exploitation, this third slave took the money out of circulation, where it could no longer be used to dispossess another family farmer.

This courageous dissident embodies the moral of the bridesmaids parable. He has awakened to the rules of the master's world. His repudiation of it is simple and curt: "Here, take back what is yours" (25:25). But he admits that through it all "I was afraid." For good reason--he is about to meet the prophet's fate.
It is instructive that the master does not refute the whistle-blower's analysis of his world. He simply castigates him as "evil and lazy" (the favorite slur of the rich toward those who don't play the game), and wonders rhetorically why the slave didn't at least seek market-rate return. The master is not interested in what is his own--he appreciates only appreciation. He then decides to make an example of the third slave, dispossessing him and giving the single talent to his obedient colleague, in order to illustrate the way the real world works: "For to those who have, more will be given--but for those who have not, even what they have will be taken away" (25:28-29).

THIS PARABLE READS MUCH MORE coherently as a cautionary tale about the world controlled by great householders (this is even clearer in Luke's version of the story, Luke 19:11-27). Jesus may even have been spinning a thinly-veiled autobiographical tale here--for he, too, will shortly stand before the powers, speak the truth, and take the consequences. To read in it a divine endorsement of mercenary economics and the inevitable polarization of wealth is to miss the point completely--and to perpetuate both dysfunctional theology and complicit economics in our churches.

The consequence of the third slave's non-cooperation is banishment to the "outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (25:30). We have presumed this to be "hell," and so perhaps it is--that is, the hell on earth experienced by those rejected by the dominant culture: in the shadows where the light of the royal courts never shine, on the mean streets outside the great households, the dwelling place of the outcast poor like Lazarus (Luke 16:19-21). But the story that immediately follows this tragic conclusion-- the famous last-judgment parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31-46) may illuminate the nature of the dissident slave's exile.

This singular judgment story in the Gospels suggests that we meet Christ mysteriously by feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting the imprisoned (Matt. 25:25-40). In other words, we meet Christ in places of pain and marginality; the "outer darkness." The whistle-blower's punishment kicks him out of the rich man's system, but brings him closer to the true Lord, who dwells with the poor and oppressed.

We have for too long ignored or trivialized parables as arcane, pedantic, or platitudinous, ever hoping to keep aright the world they mean to turn upside down. But our two examples show that Jesus used these "folksy" stories to expose the most entrenched arrangements of power and privilege, whether Roman militarism or Judean elitism. He challenged the "tall trees" of imperial domination with his "mustard seed" movement of Jubilee justice. And he called for renewed resistance to usurious "business as usual" in Israel, a costly vocation of truth and consequences.
Only by bringing the parables back down to earth can we encounter their power both to unmask the "real world" in its cruelty and presumption, and to proclaim the radical hope of God's sovereignty, buried like a seed in the hard soil of our history.

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RECOMMENDED READING

IN PARABLES AS SUBVERSIVE SPEECH (Westminster John Knox, 1994), William R. Herzog asserts that parables are more than theological statements about our relationship to God. He sees Jesus' stories as insightful social analysis and critique that unmask the world of oppression and disparity in which Jesus lived.

Herzog opens by explaining his overall approach, then carefully studies nine parables--exploring their more traditional interpretations as well as new points raised by reading them as social analysis. Herzog does not argue that his interpretations are "right," but by emphasizing the historical world of Jesus, he infuses the parables with richer meaning and offers solutions to traditionally puzzling aspects.

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